

# Right Whales take deadly hits

## Collisions with ships endanger population

By Charles Mathewson  
MPG Newspapers

PLYMOUTH — They don't move fast in the water. They don't have a high profile at the waterline. They don't pay attention to other things around them when they're looking for food and they're almost always looking for food. They don't survive collisions with ships. For centuries they were the right whale to catch. With less than 300 left, now they're the right whale to avoid.

Wednesday the Coast Guard and a variety of other agencies began warning local shipping how to stay away from the Northern Right Whale population now grazing over Stellwagen Bank and Cape Cod Bay. The most endangered of the great whales, Right Whales are killed here every year from collisions with ships and entanglement in fishing gear. A recent federal court order has forced new protection measures.

"Collisions are the main threat to Right Whales," said Anne Smrcina of the Stellwagen Bank National Sanctuary in Plymouth. "An estimated 80 percent of Right Whale deaths are due to collisions with ships. With a total population estimated at less than 300, any death weakens the population and its genetic health."

Last month new regulations banned gill-netting in Cape Cod Bay from January through May and placed new restrictions on deep water lobster trap lines. Existing law prohibits ships and boats from approaching closer than 500 yards from Right Whales.

### SPOTLIGHT

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But the marine mammals don't make it easy for shipping to avoid them. Carrying more blubber than the average whale, they move very slowly. They cruise coastal waters where boats and ships collect. During their stay in local waters they feed close to the surface, but they don't have a dorsal fin on their back so they're tough to spot. They feed on tiny plankton, rare in these waters at this time of year, and they concentrate on the job.

Human activity hasn't made the whale's survival easy. Because they were easier to kill, carried more oil-rich blubber and had

more filter-feeding baleen than other whales, humans from the Indians to the harpooners sought the Right Whale. Up to two-thirds of the diminishing population will spend time in Cape Cod Bay from now through April when they begin to move north to Nova Scotia. They compete here for ocean space with shipping.

"The only good thing is, there's not a lot of recreational boating when they're here," Smrcina said. "They have to contend with shipping coming through the Cape Cod Canal and the major shipping lane which crosses Stellwagen Bank."

The new early warning network advises all that shipping how to stay within the law and stay away from the whales. The Coast Guard will do helicopter flyovers of the bay. Vessels from the Center for Coastal Studies, the state's division of marine fisheries, the federal department of marine fisheries, and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration will report Right Whale sightings while on other missions in the bay.

NOAA and Coast Guard radio will include regular whale alerts as part of their 24-hour broadcasts.